

Overnight Chicago

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Symphony sporting sweatbands on its highbrows

By John von Rhein

Music critic

The Beethoven "Missa Solemnis" it wasn't. But if you can imagine the Chicago Bears fight song performed by the entire Chicago Symphony Orchestra and members of its Symphony Chorus, with none other than Georg Solti as cheerleader in chief, you have a good idea of the tidal wave of pleskin pride that poured from the CSO's postconcert rally Thursday night in Orchestra Hall.

Need it be said that Solti urged his championship team onward with all the fervor of a Mike Ditka pep talk? Or that chorus—some of whom were sporting Bears stocking caps and Jim McMahon sweatbands and shades—sang as lustily as if the music were by Mahler?

The roar of the capacity crowd could, no doubt, be heard as far as New Orleans. Super Bowl Mania had struck again.

If you couldn't have cared less about pro football, however, and were content to hear Tchaikovsky and Liszt in performances of the highest quality, you also came to the right place. Solti was treating the subscribers to what amounted to a Ravinia pops concert, although far better played than is the summer norm, and enlivened as well by the combustible pianism of André Watts, the evening's double-threat soloist in Liszt's "Totentanz" and Piano Concerto No. 1.

The two piano works represent



Tribune photo by Carl Wagner

It took brass for Chicago Symphony musicians to play the Bears' fight song in team stocking caps Thursday night, but it took even more verve to wear a sweatband labeled "Cups" as did one horn player [left].

Liszt as the Romantic showman—virtuoso par excellence, with keyboard and orchestra now opposed, now joined, in an exhilarating test of bravura strength. Musically, of course, they are shallow, obvious and even crude. It requires the most understanding kind of alchemy, lyrical as well as leonine, to make Liszt's crass vulgarities respectable—and Watts happens to be one of the most sympathetic, mettlesome Liszt pianists around.

His E-flat Concerto whispered and sang, glittered and thundered: You could almost see a crackling

medieval sequence *Dies irae* in a gloss of pianistic fire and brimstone, carrying the soloist from one end of the keyboard [in all other in a series of diabolic [in all senses] variations. It's pure exhibitionism—virtuoso-kitsch at its most campy—but Watts belied its technical difficulties with a reading at once feverish and frisky. Again, he and Solti refused to condescend to the music, and that made all the difference.

Two of Tchaikovsky's most popular scores, the "Romeo and Juliet" Fantasy Overture and "Nutcracker" Suite, Op. 71a, framed the Liszt works. These are intended as filler material for a CSO/Decca recording featuring the "1812" Overture, performed last fall. One does not associate Solti with either piece, but the remarkable thing was how faithfully he captured the essential musical character of both.

In "Romeo and Juliet" the melancholy tread of the lower strings signaled the dark Russian fatefulness that pervaded this reading.

The "Nutcracker" excerpts amounted to a belated Christmas gift, festively wrapped and professed with charm, grace and affection. Solti found just the right musical depiction of each episode, making a whirlwind of the "Trepak" while spinning thisledown dreams in the Sugar Plum Fairy's dance. As a symphonic, as opposed to a balletic, treatment, this could scarcely be bettered.